

Tiantai Hermeneutics: Zhiyi's Interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* Presented in the *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi*

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Why did the Buddha preach so many different and often wildly contradictory sutras? And what is the underlying message that the Buddha wished to present through these sutras? These are the basic issues of Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics. The aim of this paper is to consider the answers to these questions set forth by Zhiyi 智顗 (538-597), the founder of the Tiantai 天台 school of Chinese Buddhism.

Zhiyi is one of the most important figures in the development of Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics. He is noted for his complex and highly sophisticated hermeneutic system that he developed for interpreting Buddhist sutras. In the following pages, I will argue that Zhiyi uses the *Lotus Sutra*'s concept of expedient means (*upāya*) as the key to explaining the relationship between the various different and often contradictory Buddhist teachings. To make this point, I will first consider the hermeneutics that he develops in his *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義 (T 1716.33) or *Profound Meaning of the Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Sublime Dharma*, his most important work on the philosophy of the *Lotus Sutra*. (I will refer to this work below as the *Xuanyi*.)

1. Preliminary Remarks

Hermeneutics, according to Donald S. Lopez, is “concerned with establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning, especially from a text” (Lopez 1988: 1). Although this term originally referred to the principles for interpreting the Christian Bible, it is now used in a more general sense to refer to the rules, methods or theories governing the exegesis of any text.¹ When hermeneutics is defined in this way, we can recognize that Zhiyi is unquestionably one of

¹ The classic study on modern hermeneutic theories is Palmer 1969.

the most important figures in the development of Buddhist hermeneutics in China. Throughout his writings, Zhiyi self-consciously formulates principles for interpreting Buddhist canonical works and uses them methodically in order to explicate the meaning of the texts he confronts.

As Lopez notes, in the hands of Buddhist scholar-monks, hermeneutics often served as a “hermeneutic of control,” i.e., as a method to establish one’s own vision of the Buddhist truth as normative for the Buddhist tradition as a whole and to subsume all other interpretations under one’s own. There is no denying that Zhiyi frequently engages in such a hermeneutic. However (and this is a point that Lopez also makes), Buddhists were not motivated to develop hermeneutic strategies solely to assert the dominance of their own vision of Buddhism over that of others. Their overriding concern was to discover the contents of the Buddha’s enlightenment by discerning the true meaning of the Buddha’s words. This was especially urgent in China, which saw the continuous importation of a vast array of different, and often contradictory, sutras from India, all claiming to be authentic records of the Buddha’s sermons. Zhiyi’s interest in hermeneutics derives from his desire to establish systematic principles for understanding the Buddha’s words as a whole.

2. The Fivefold Profound Meanings in the *Xuanyi*

With these remarks, let me turn to Zhiyi’s hermeneutics as found in the *Xuanyi*.² The *Xuanyi* is a detailed exposition of Tiantai philosophy presented in the form of an analysis of the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. It was originally delivered as a lecture during the summer retreat (*xiaanju* 夏安居) in 593 and was later edited into its present form by Zhiyi’s disciple, Guanding 灌頂 (561-632). Since the time of Zhanran 湛然 (711-782), the sixth Tiantai patriarch, the *Xuanyi* has been counted among the “Three Major Works” (*sandabu* 三大部) of the Tiantai school, the two other texts being the *Miaofa lienhua jing wenju* 妙法蓮華經文句 (*Words and Phrases of the Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Sublime Dharma*) and the *Mohezhi guan* 摩訶止觀 (*Great Calming and Insight*), a comprehensive guide to meditation.

The hermeneutic system that Zhiyi develops in the *Xuanyi* is extremely complex and multifaceted, inasmuch as it tries to explain the significance of the *Lotus Sutra* from multiple perspectives. First, it is important to note that he employs the scheme of the fivefold profound meanings to explicate a sutra’s message from five perspectives. The five profound meanings are as follows:

² For an insightful analysis of the Tiantai approach to the *Lotus Sutra*, see Andō 1968: 36-53. Hurvitz has also discussed the Tiantai tenet classification in detail (see Hurvitz 1960-62: 229-271).

1. explication of the title of the sutra (*shiming* 釋名)
2. discussion of the substance of the sutra (*bianti* 辨體)
3. clarification of the essential point of the sutra (*mingzong* 明宗)
4. discussion of the function of the sutra (*lunyong* 論用)
5. classification of the tenets (*panjiao* 判教)

Zhiyi uses this fivefold scheme in a number of his commentaries, such as those on the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sutra*, *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, *Guanyin Invitation Sutra*, *Vimalakīrti Sutra* and *Diamond Sutra*.³ However, in the pages below, I will limit myself to the exposition found in the *Xuanyi*.

The analysis of the sutra from the standpoint of the first perspective—the explication of the title of the sutra—takes up the bulk of the *Xuanyi*, approximately two-thirds of the entire text. Zhiyi begins his analysis of the sutra's title by arguing that the title serves to reveal the Buddha's insight underlying the sutra. The title, as it were, symbolizes the sutra's teaching as a whole. Next, he focuses on the term “sublime” (*miao* 妙) in the phrase “sublime Dharma” in the sutra's title (the full title of the sutra is, as noted above, *Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Sublime Dharma*) and argues that the term “sublime Dharma” refers to absolute reality (*shixiang* 實相), which, in the philosophical vocabulary of Tiantai Buddhism, can be expressed as the perfect interfusion of the three truths (*yuanrong sandi* 圓融三諦), i.e., the fact that all dharmas are immediately empty, provisionally real and the middle way between them (*jikong jijia jizhong* 即空即假即中). This is a significant point. Earlier commentaries on the *Lotus Sutra* had understood the basic message of this sutra to be found in its teaching of the One Vehicle (preached in the Expedient Means Chapter) or in the teaching that the lifespan of Śākyamuni Buddha is immensely long (expounded in the Lifespan of the Tathāgata Chapter). However, Zhiyi maintains that the sutra's message concerns the ultimate nature of reality itself.

Next, turning to the second perspective, Zhiyi argues that the substance of the *Lotus Sutra* is absolute reality itself. As noted above, absolute reality here refers to the true nature of all dharmas, which, in Tiantai philosophy, is expressed as their being immediately empty, provisionally real and the middle.

Third, the essential point of the *Lotus Sutra* is defined as “the cause and fruit of the Buddha's own practice” (*fō zixing yinguo* 佛自行因果) or, more briefly, buddhahood and the practices leading to it. According to Zhiyi, the practices and the resulting buddhahood recounted in sutras preached before

³ Satō has suggested the possibility that this commentary on the *Diamond Sutra* may not be by Zhiyi. See Satō 1964: 411-412. In addition, it may be noted that the five profound meanings also appear in Zhiyi's commentary on the *Contemplation Sutra*. However, this commentary is a Tang-period work forged under Zhiyi's name. See Satō 1964: 567-601.

the *Lotus* are still mixed with expedient teachings and therefore those sutras do not reveal the Buddha's unadulterated insight into absolute reality. However, this is not the case with the *Lotus Sutra*. According to Zhiyi, the practices for attaining buddhahood taught in the *Lotus Sutra* are practices based on absolute reality and the buddhahood attained through these practices is also none other than absolute reality itself.

Concerning the fourth point, the function of the *Lotus Sutra*, Zhiyi states that it can be encapsulated in two types of knowledge, the provisional and the true (*quanshi erzhi* 權實二智). True knowledge (*shizhi* 實智) refers to insight into absolute reality: the insight that all dharmas are immediately empty, provisionally real and the middle. This is only natural, because the substance of the *Lotus Sutra* is, as we saw above, absolute reality. However, at the same time, this knowledge of absolute reality is coupled with provisional knowledge (*quanzhi* 權智), which refers to the ability to expound provisional teachings as expedient means for leading sentient beings to true insight into absolute reality. In Zhiyi's view, the *Lotus Sutra* teaches that the Buddha not only expounded his insight into absolute reality but also his skill at using expedient means to lead sentient beings to this insight.

Let me interrupt my analysis of the five profound meanings to make the following point. From the above, it is clear that Zhiyi understood that the basic message of the *Lotus Sutra* concerns the nature of absolute reality itself, which, in the philosophical vocabulary of Tiantai Buddhism, can be expressed as the perfect interfusion of the three truths, i.e., the fact that all dharmas are immediately empty, provisionally real and the middle. This is a significant point, because earlier commentaries on the *Lotus* had understood its basic message as being contained in its teaching of the One Vehicle or in its teaching of the Buddha's immensely long lifespan. However, Zhiyi maintains that the sutra's message concerns the nature of ultimate reality itself.

As is well known, the One Vehicle doctrine holds that all beings can, and indeed must, ultimately attain buddhahood. This doctrine presupposes the doctrine of the Three Vehicles, which holds that Buddhist practitioners can be distinguished into three types—*śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas* and bodhisattvas—culminating in different attainments—those of arhat, *pratyekabuddha* and perfect buddhahood, respectively. In the *Lotus Sutra*, however, this three-fold distinction among Buddhist practitioners is revealed to be an expedient device, i.e., a provisional teaching preached by the Buddha. From the Buddha's perspective, the true teaching is that there is only one path of spiritual practice in Buddhism, the bodhisattva path culminating in the attainment of perfect buddhahood, and even those practitioners who consider themselves to be *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* must eventually convert to the bodhisattva

path and strive to attain perfect buddhahood. The Buddha preached the Three Vehicles because he realized that Buddhist practitioners are of diverse abilities and inclinations and not all of them are capable of undertaking the arduous bodhisattva practices from the start. Thus he accommodated his teaching to the levels of understanding of his audience and first taught that there are three different paths of Buddhist practice. But, once the spiritual capacities of his audience had matured, he preached the *Lotus Sutra* in which he revealed the doctrine of the Three Vehicles to be an expedient teaching (*upāya*) and set forth the doctrine of the One Vehicle that he wanted to teach all long.

As this shows, the doctrine of expedient means is used in the *Lotus Sutra* to make a soteriological point: the teaching of the Three Vehicles is simply a provisional teaching used by the Buddha to lead his audience to his true teaching. There is no question that Zhiyi recognized the importance of the *Lotus Sutra*'s One Vehicle doctrine and its message of universal buddhahood. However, it is also important to note that he discovered in the concept of expedient means the master key to explain not only the relationship between the Three Vehicles and One Vehicle doctrines in the *Lotus Sutra* but also the reason why there exist all sorts of diverse, and often contradictory, positions concerning a variety of doctrines within the Buddhist scriptures. In other words, Zhiyi saw the many different teachings found in the Buddhist scriptures to be provisional teachings preached by the Buddha as expedient means for leading sentient beings to his final true teaching.

3. Zhiyi's Tenet Classification

The last of the five profound meanings is called the classification of the tenets. It is here that Zhiyi develops his well-known tenet classification.⁴ Tenet classification, which holds an important place in the doctrinal systems of Chinese Buddhist schools, refers to schemes for systematically classifying and arranging Buddhist sutras in order to bring out the Buddha's true intention underlying the entire corpus of Buddhist scriptures.⁵ The need to develop

⁴ The classic outline of the Tiantai tenet classification system is set forth in the *Tiantai sijiaoyi* 天台四教儀, written in the late tenth century by the Korean monk Cheguan 諦觀 (?-971). For an English translation of this text, see The Buddhist Translation Seminar of Hawaii 1983. The *Tiantai sijiaoyi* subsequently became the standard introduction to Tiantai Buddhism, but the tenet classification presented in this text is somewhat different from the one developed by Zhiyi himself. On this point, see The Buddhist Translation Seminar of Hawaii 1983: 36-39.

⁵ For a thorough study of tenet classifications, see Petzold 1995. An insightful analysis of early Chinese tenet classifications is Ōchō 1981.

such systems arose in the early 400s when the authoritative translations of a number of important sutras, including the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vimalakīrti*, *Lotus*, *Huayan* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtras*, appeared. Many of these sutras contained teachings that differed from, and frequently grossly contradicted, each other. Tenet classification schemes were devised as a means to reconcile the discrepancies and contradictions found in these sutras.

Zhiyi presents a brief summary of his tenet classification at the beginning of the *Xuanyi* (T 1716.33: 682a-b) and develops it at greater length in the tenth and final fascicle (T 1716.33: 800a-814a). For the sake of convenience, I will refer to these two sections as the Summary and the Extended Analysis, respectively. Unfortunately, these sections are not easy to follow. The Summary is extremely terse and hard to understand, while the Extended Analysis is somewhat rambling and unfocused, also making it difficult to grasp. However, the general points are clear.

Zhiyi begins by dividing the Buddhist sutras chronologically into five stages. The first period is associated with the *Huayan Sūtra*. This is in keeping with the words of the sūtra itself, which holds that it was preached immediately after the Buddha's enlightenment. In both the Summary and the Extended Analysis, this period is likened to the time when the sun first appears at dawn. At this point, the sun illuminates only the mountain peaks and the rest of the land is still dark. This image is used to underscore the point that the teaching of the *Huayan Sūtra* represents the highest pinnacle of the Buddha's insight.

The second period is the period of the Tripiṭaka teachings.⁶ At this stage, the Buddha expounded the teachings of the so-called Lesser Vehicle, specifically the teachings of the four *Agama* sutras, such as the doctrines of impermanence and the Four Noble Truths. In the Summary (but not in the Extended Analysis), this period is likened to the stage where the sun shines down into the deep valleys.

During the third period, the Buddha taught the various *Vaipulya* sutras, such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. In these sutras, the Buddha criticized the teachings of the Lesser Vehicle that he had preached earlier and praised the Mahāyāna teachings. In the Summary (but again not in the Extended Analysis), this period is likened to the time when the sun shines down on the plains and all things cast their shadows in accordance with their shapes.

The fourth period is the period of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. During this period, the Buddha taught the doctrine of emptiness to all practitioners of the Three Vehicles: *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas* and bodhisattvas. However, when

⁶ It may be noted that the *Tiantai sijiaoyi* calls this the Deer Park period, but in the *Xuanyi* this period is generally called the period of the Tripiṭaka.

śrāvakas and *pratyekabuddhas* gain insight into emptiness, they straightaways enter nirvana, but, when bodhisattvas gain the same insight, they remain in the world out of compassion to work for the liberation of all beings. This period is likened to the situation where an adult can bear to stay in the sun but young children lose their sight when they look at the sun.

The fifth period is that of the *Lotus Sutra*. The significance of this sutra lies not in the fact that it taught any particular doctrine but in the fact that it presents the “grand design” (so to speak) behind the Buddha’s preaching career, i.e., his plan to preach various expedient teachings with the ultimate aim of leading everyone to his highest insight. In the Summary (but not in the Extended Analysis), this period is likened to the time when the sun is at its zenith and objects cast no shadow. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, which the Buddha is said to have preached at the time of his entry into *parinirvāṇa*, is also included in this period.

It may be noted that Zhiyi also correlates these five periods with the teaching of the five flavors found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* (T 375.12: 690c-691a; The Buddhist Translation Seminar of Hawaii 1983: 72, note 8). The five flavors refer to the five stages in which milk is transformed into ghee: milk, cream, curd, butter and ghee. Just as milk is refined into ghee in this way, the sutra continues, the essence of the Buddhist teaching is gradually distilled and refined in the following five steps: 1. twelvefold scriptures, 2. ninefold sutras, 3. *Vaipulya* sutras, 4. *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, 5. *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Correlating the five flavors with the five periods, Zhiyi states that the *Huayan* period corresponds to the flavor of milk, the *Tripiṭaka* period to cream, the *Vaipulya* period to curd, the *Prajñāpāramitā* period to butter and the period of the *Lotus* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutras* to ghee.

This, in a nutshell, is Zhiyi’s five-stage chronological classification of Buddhist sutras. However, Zhiyi further overlays this chronological classification with another hermeneutical system based on the three teaching methods employed by the Buddha: the sudden method, the gradual method and the indeterminate method. The sudden method refers to the way in which the Buddha expressed his insight into absolute reality in a straightforward manner, without taking into consideration the ability of the audience to understand it. Zhiyi identified this method with the Buddha’s exposition in the *Huayan Sutra*, where the Buddha preached the content of his enlightenment just as he himself experienced it. However, the sutra claims that the Buddha’s teaching was so profound that it could not be understood by those who had not sufficiently progressed along the path of spiritual cultivation.

It was for this reason that the Buddha was compelled to resort to the gradual teaching. This is the method whereby he first preached simple doctrines and proceeded gradually to more profound teachings until he was ultimately

able to express his most profound insight, which was what he wanted to preach all along. This method of progressing step by step to deeper levels is what is called the gradual teaching. It corresponds to the teachings of the Tripiṭaka, *Vaipulya* and *Prajñāpāramitā* periods. Finally, when the Buddha realized that the spiritual capacities of his disciples had deepened to the point that they could understand his deepest insight, he preached the *Lotus Sutra*, the perfect and sudden teaching, in which he expressed (to use a phrase from the *Lotus Sutra*) the “Buddha’s wisdom and insight” (*fozijian* 佛知見). As an aside, it may be noted that in the later Tiantai exegetical tradition the *Lotus Sutra* is classified as being neither sudden nor gradual.

Finally, the indeterminate teaching refers to the case where one hears a teaching corresponding to the level of the Tripiṭaka, *Vaipulya* and *Prajñāpāramitā* periods but gains, not the insight associated with the respective teaching, but the insight associated with some other teaching, either of a higher or lower level.⁷

It may be added here that Zhiyi correlates these three teaching methods with the three methods of Tiantai meditative contemplation: the perfect and sudden contemplation (*yuantunguan* 圓頓觀), the gradual contemplation (*jianguan* 漸觀) and the indeterminate contemplation (*budingguan* 不定觀). The first refers to the meditative practice in which the practitioner contemplates absolute reality from the moment he or she arouses the aspiration for enlightenment and embarks on the path of spiritual contemplation. According to the Tiantai meditation system, this is the highest form of contemplation and corresponds to the method outlined in the *Mohezhiguan*. The gradual contemplation refers to the practitioner’s beginning from a relatively simple form of meditation and gradually progressing to deeper and more difficult forms of meditation. This form of meditation is taught in the *Shi chan boluomi zidi famen* 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門 (*Graduated Dharma-gates Explicating the Perfection of Meditation*, T 1916.46). In the indeterminate contemplation, the practitioner practices a particular kind of meditation and gains insight that does not correspond to that level of meditation. An example would be the case of a practitioner who undertakes a relatively simple form of meditation and gains insight into absolute reality, the deepest insight according to Tiantai Buddhism.

⁷ In the *Tiantai sijiaoyi*, the “secret” teaching is added to the sudden, gradual and indeterminate teachings, and they are collectively called the “four modes of conversion” (*huafa sijiao* 化法四教). However, the secret teaching does not represent a special teaching method in the *Xuanyi*. See The Buddhist Translation Seminar of Hawaii 1983: 37-38.

4. The Four Teachings from the Perspective of Doctrinal Content in the *Xuanyi*

As described above, Zhiyi proposed two ways of classifying the sutras, chronologically and in terms of the method of teaching employed. But this is not all. He presents a third classification scheme, which distinguishes the teachings found in the sutras on the basis of their doctrinal content.⁸ Although Zhiyi does not give any name to this classification scheme, I refer to it below as the “four teachings.” These four teachings are as follows:

1. Tripitaka teaching (*zangjiao* 藏教), which teaches that all dharmas are in constant flux, continually arising and passing away.
2. Shared teaching (*tongjiao* 通教), which teaches that all dharmas are empty and devoid of self-nature.
3. Distinct teaching (*biejiao* 別教), which teaches the provisional existence of dharmas.
4. Perfect teaching (*yuanjiao* 圓教), which teaches the highest Tiantai insight of the perfect interfusion of the three truths: the realization that all things are immediately empty, provisionally real and the middle way between these extremes.

The scheme of the four doctrines of conversion appears repeatedly throughout the *Xuanyi* and plays a central role in its interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*. Interestingly, the four doctrines of conversion are mentioned only in passing in the Summary and the Extended Analysis. The most important reference to these four teachings in the Summary is a brief and cryptic line: “The *Huayan* is combined (*jian* 兼), the Tripitaka is only (*dan* 但), the *Vaipulya* is contrasted (*dui* 對), the *Prajñāpāramitā* is girded (*dai* 帶)” (T 1716.33: 682b). This formula correlates the five periods of the Buddha’s preaching career with the four teachings. According to this formulation, in the *Huayan* period, the Buddha taught both distinct and perfect teachings; in the Tripitaka period, he taught only the Tripitaka teaching; in the *Vaipulya* period, he taught all four teachings, contrasting the inferior Tripitaka teaching with the other three more advanced teachings; and in the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaching, he taught the perfect teaching in conjunction with the shared and distinct teachings.

In this way, the interpretive scheme of the four teachings appears only tangentially in the sections devoted to the tenet classification. However, it plays an extremely important role in the Tiantai hermeneutical system because the

⁸ This classification system corresponds to the “four doctrines of conversion” (*huayi sijiao* 化儀四教) found in the *Tiantai sijiaoyi*. Zhiyi, however, does not use this term in his works.

four teachings provide the framework for analyzing the question of why the Buddha taught so many different, and often quite contradictory, sutras during his lifetime. This, as mentioned before, is the central issue for Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics.

The most important point that Zhiyi wants to make in this fourfold classification is that the Perfect Teaching represents the highest insight of the Buddha. And—this is just as important—Zhiyi wants to argue that this highest insight is set forth in pure form only in the *Lotus Sutra*. But why did the Buddha have to teach less advanced levels of insight, such as the Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings, if the Perfect Teaching represents his highest insight? In other words, why didn't he just preach the Perfect Teaching all along? The answer is that the insight associated with the Perfect Teaching is so profound and so hard to understand that it was first necessary for the Buddha to teach less advanced teachings (such as those of the Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings) in order to gradually lead his audience to his highest insight—the Perfect Teaching.

This, as is well known, is the doctrine of expedient means (*upāya*) found in the *Lotus Sutra*. But it is important to note that, in the *Lotus Sutra* itself, the *upāya* doctrine is used to explain why the Buddha preached the doctrine of the Three Vehicles if the doctrine of the One Vehicle was his true teaching. But, in the *Xuanyi*, Zhiyi amplified the concept of *upāya* into a general hermeneutic concept to explain the existence of different levels of teachings within the Buddhist sutras (not just the contradiction between the Three Vehicles and One Vehicle but all contradictions found in the sutras). So for Zhiyi the notion of *upāya* becomes the master key for unlocking the fundamental hermeneutic issue for Chinese Buddhists, which, as I just said, was: why are there so many, often mutually contradictory, teachings within the Buddhist scriptures?

Now, with this in mind, I would like to move on to another fundamental question of Tiantai hermeneutics, which is the question of the relationship between the Buddha's highest insight (that is to say, the insight expressed in the Perfect Teaching) and the provisional, expedient insight that he preached as *upāya* in the Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings. In other words, what is the relationship between the truth and *upāya*? To explain this point, let me first consider the notions of the relative sublime (*xiangdai miao* 相待妙) and absolute sublime (*juedai miao* 絕待妙) found in the *Xuanyi*.⁹

Zhiyi devotes almost ninety percent of the section discussing the title of the *Lotus Sutra* to expounding the meaning of the term "sublime." He explains

⁹ The following analysis is based on Tamura 1965: 3-12. The passage in the *Xuanyi* dealing with the concept of the sublime is translated in Swanson 1989: 124-129.

this term using the concepts of relative sublime and absolute sublime. The former refers to the case where the sublime is considered to be sublime in contrast with the coarse (*cu* 麤). Zhiyi maintains that the term “sublime” is synonymous with “absolute” (*jue* 絕; T 1716.33: 697b), so from this perspective, the relative sublime can be defined as the situation in which the absolute is considered absolute in contrast to the relative. However, in this case, the absolute is still relative to the relative. In other words, it is a relative absolute. Hence, it is still not absolute in a genuine sense.

On the other hand, the absolute sublime refers to the situation in which all relativity is totally transcended. In this case, the term “sublime” refers to the state beyond all dualities, including even the dualities of “coarse” and “sublime” (or “relative” and “absolute”). Since it is a state in which all discrimination (*fenbie* 分別) has been transcended, Zhiyi describes it as “inconceivable” (*bukesiyi* 不可思議), i.e., beyond conceptual understanding and perceivable only through the wisdom of the buddhas. Moreover, since it refers to a state in which the distinction between the sublime and coarse (or between the absolute and the relative) has been overcome, it would mean that, in Tiantai Buddhist parlance, the sublime is immediately the coarse (*miao ji cu* 妙即麤) and the coarse is immediately the sublime (*cu ji miao* 麤即妙). There is, in other words, no distinction between the coarse and sublime; the sublime is in itself the coarse, and the coarse is in itself the sublime.

According to Zhiyi, it is only in the *Lotus Sutra* that this world of absolute non-duality is described in pristine form. This absolute non-duality is what is indicated by the word “sublime” found in the sutra’s title. However, as noted above, Zhiyi recognizes that there are two aspects to the notion of “sublime”—relative sublime and absolute sublime—and interprets the sutra’s teaching from these two perspectives. First, from the perspective of the relative sublime, the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* is considered to be superior to that of all other sutras. This is because, in Zhiyi’s understanding, the *Lotus Sutra* presents the Buddha’s true teaching, while earlier sutras were mixed with provisional teachings employed as expedient means (*upāya*) for leading sentient beings to the true teaching.

However, Zhiyi continues that it is inadequate to understand the significance of the *Lotus Sutra* simply from the perspective of the relative sublime. It is also necessary to take into consideration the perspective of the absolute sublime. As noted above, from this perspective, the coarse is in itself the sublime, and vice versa. This implies that the provisional teachings expounded in earlier sutras are identical to the true teaching presented in the *Lotus Sutra*. In other words, the provisional teachings also partake of the true teaching, inasmuch as they are genuine, though partial, expressions of the Buddha’s insight into absolute reality. Frequently, in Buddhist texts

the provisional teachings are likened to a raft that one casts away after crossing a river. According to this simile, once the true teaching is revealed, the earlier provisional teachings are superseded and should be cast aside since they are no longer necessary. This, in fact, is how the provisional teachings are understood from the standpoint of the relative sublime. However, from the viewpoint of the absolute sublime, once the true teaching is revealed, the provisional teachings are recognized as playing indispensable roles in bringing sentient beings to buddhahood. In this way, the Buddha's teachings are understood holistically, with all the manifold Buddhist teachings, the true as well as the provisional, possessing absolute value in leading sentient beings to buddhahood.

How then does Zhiyi use this theoretical structure to develop his hermeneutics in the *Xuanyi*? In the second fascicle of this text, he takes up for analysis six objects (*jing* 境), or six sets of Buddhist doctrines, and analyzes them using the scheme of the four teachings. The six objects he takes up are: 1. ten such-likes; 2. twelvefold chain of dependent origination; 3. four noble truths; 4. two truths; 5. three truths; 6. one truth. Since these passages have already been translated into English (Swanson 1989: 212-56), I will refrain from discussing them at length here. Instead I will focus only on the twelvefold chain of dependent origination and use it as an example to illustrate Zhiyi's argument.

Zhiyi analyzes the teachings concerning the twelvefold chain of dependent origination found in Buddhist sutras into four levels corresponding to the four teachings.

1. The level corresponding to the Tripitaka teaching is called "conceivable arising-and-perishing twelvefold chain of dependent origination" (*siyi shengmie shieryinyuan* 思議生滅十二因緣). This refers to the situation in which all of the twelve links are understood as arising and passing away from one instant to the next.

2. The level corresponding to the Shared teaching is called "conceivable non-arising-and-perishing twelvefold chain of dependent origination" (*siyi bushengmie shieryinyuan* 思議不生滅十二因緣). This refers to the twelve links understood as being empty.

3. The level corresponding to the Distinct teaching is called "inconceivable arising-and-perishing twelvefold chain of dependent origination" (*busiyi shengmie shieryinyuan* 不思議生滅十二因緣). This refers to the twelve links understood as existing provisionally.

4. The level corresponding to the Perfect teaching is called "inconceivable non-arising-and-perishing twelvefold chain of dependent origination" (*busiyi bushengmie shieryinyuan* 不思議不生滅十二因緣). This refers to the

twelve links seen to be immediately empty, provisionally existent and the middle.

After classifying the teachings concerning the twelvefold chain of dependent origination into these four levels, Zhiyi next discusses in two sections how they are related to each other. The sections are entitled Classification into the Coarse and Sublime (*pancumiao* 判麤妙) and Exposing the Coarse and Manifesting the Sublime (*kaicu xianmiao* 開麤顯妙). Although Zhiyi does not say so explicitly, they correspond to the perspectives of the relative and the absolute sublime, respectively. In the first section (Classification into the Coarse and Sublime), Zhiyi argues that each successive level can be seen as being more sublime than the previous level. According to this scheme, the understanding of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination developed at the level of the Separate teaching is sublime, in contrast to that of the Tripitaka teaching, which is coarse. In the same way, the understanding of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination at the level of the Distinct teaching is sublime, while those of the Tripitaka and Shared teachings are coarse. Finally, the understanding of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination at the level of the Perfect teaching is sublime, in contrast to those of the three previous levels, which are all coarse. In this way, the understanding of the twelvefold chain at the level of the Perfect teaching is considered to represent the highest level of insight into this doctrine. From this perspective, the first three teachings are understood as provisional, *upāya* teachings leading up to, and ultimately superseded by, the true insight presented in the Perfect teaching.

On the other hand, from the perspective of “exposing the coarse and manifesting the sublime,” the first three teachings are considered to be genuine, if partial, expressions of the position advanced in the final Perfect teaching. In more traditional terminology, the understanding of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination at the levels of the Tripitaka, Shared and Distinct teachings are identical with (*ji* 卽) that of the Perfect teaching. In other words, the doctrine of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination expounded in the former three teachings, although inferior to that of the Perfect teaching in a relative sense, is identical with the Perfect teaching in an absolute sense. In other words, they all possess absolute value as expressions of the Buddha’s compassionate desire to bring all beings to perfect enlightenment.

Although here I have taken up only the example of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, Zhiyi uses the notions of “classification into the coarse and sublime” and “exposing the coarse and manifesting the sublime” in his analysis of the four noble truths, two truths, three truths and one truth as well. Hence, it can be said that these two notions, and the notion of expedient

means that undergirds these notions, are central to Zhiyi's entire approach to understanding the diverse, and frequently contradictory, interpretations of Buddhist doctrines found in the sutras.

Conclusion

In the ways outlined above, Zhiyi created in the *Xuanyi* a complex hermeneutic system for interpreting the *Lotus Sutra*. Such a hermeneutic system was necessary to answer the following question that confronted Zhiyi and many other Buddhists: why are there so many diverse, and often contradictory, teachings within the Buddhist canon? He argued that they reflect the existence of many provisional, expedient teachings in the Buddhist sutras, all preached by the Buddha in order to lead sentient beings to his final true insight. In terms of the four teachings, the Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings are all expedient (*upāya*) teachings, while the Perfect teaching, revealed in unadulterated form in the *Lotus Sutra*, is the Buddha's true teaching. Hence, in one sense (specifically from the perspective of the relative sublime), once the true teaching is revealed in the *Lotus Sutra*, the teachings found in all earlier sutras are simultaneously revealed to be expedient *upāya* teachings. However, this does not mean that the expedient teachings become useless. In Zhiyi's opinion, the opposite is actually the case. From the standpoint of the Buddha's true teaching (that is to say, from the standpoint of the Perfect teaching, where all dualities are transcended), the true Perfect teaching is seen to be identical with the expedient Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings. From this perspective, all the teachings preached by the Buddha, the expedient as well as the true, or the Tripiṭaka, Shared and Distinct teachings as well as the Perfect teaching, are seen as having absolute, irreplaceable value in leading sentient beings to buddhahood.

To conclude, the notion of expedient means found in the *Lotus Sutra* holds a central place in Zhiyi's hermeneutic system. Although the *Lotus Sutra* used it for the specific purpose of explaining why the Buddha preached the doctrine of the Three Vehicles although the doctrine of the One Vehicle was his true teaching, Zhiyi amplified this into a general hermeneutic concept for explaining the existence of diverse positions on a particular teaching or doctrine within the Buddhist sutras. Hence, it can be said that the notion of expedient means provided Zhiyi with a master key for unlocking the fundamental hermeneutic issue for Chinese Buddhists: why do there exist many, often mutually contradictory, teachings within the Buddhist scriptures?

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